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Kirk B. Sides

“Ecologies of Relation: Post-Slavery, Post-Apartheid and Rethinking Race Across the Atlantic in Zakes Mda’s *Cion*.”

“Inserted in the history of colonialism, America appears less as exceptional and more as a pioneer in the history and technology of settler colonialism. All the defining institutions of settler colonialism were produced as so many technologies of native control in North America...The American ‘reservation’ became the South African ‘reserve.’”¹
 – Mahmood Mamdani

This article will argue that Zakes Mda’s 2007 novel *Cion* stages a dialogue, one where two “Souths” – South Africa and the American South – speak to one another and give a critical voice to an under-acknowledged history of transatlantic discursive exchange on race and racial governance. Mda’s fictional South African critique, of an America still struggling with the cultural and political legacies of slavery, gestures towards a history of exchange between the two countries² that in many ways is representative of a more global dialogue on racial segregation during the first half of the twentieth century – of which both southern (U.S.) segregation and apartheid are seminal examples. Whereas a post-reconstruction United States initially provided a model for the early development of the South African nation – especially in terms of the dovetailing issues of industrial modernization³ and racial segregation – Mda offers a post-apartheid critique of twenty-first century American race discourse still mired in notions of essentialism, racial purity and the seemingly unproductive trap of nostalgia. Through the perspective of the sojourning South African protagonist Toloki, who Mda

¹ Mamdani, Mahmood. “Settler Colonialism: Then and Now.” *Critical Inquiry* 41 (Spring 2015) 13.

² The transnational comparison of these two nations is critically important precisely for the ways in which the nationalist rhetorics of each have defined both respective countries according to paradigms of both isolationism and exceptionalism.

³ For instance see: Mona Domosh’s “Selling Civilization: Toward a Cultural Analysis of America’s Economic Empire in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 29.4 (December 2004): 453-467.

first introduced to readers in his debut novel *Ways of Dying* (1995), the author gives voice to what Yogita Goyal has termed “slavery and its transnational afterlives.”⁴ While there is much evidence linking the influence of early twentieth century America race policies – most notably Jim Crow segregation – on the development of South Africa’s own discourse of proto-apartheid segregation laws, there is very little in the way of critical discussion of this problematic influence, not to mention one that provincializes and critiques American racial politics in the way Mda imagines in this novel. Moreover, *Cion* draws a largely uncommon and unacknowledged line across the Atlantic world, bringing two histories of racial violence into relation, a line that not only moves us out of the well-worn critiques based on histories of transatlantic slavery, but in doing so goes some way towards suggesting a larger notion of how racist thinking has historically functioned more globally.

Moreover, this article explores various conceptualizations of race as well as the governance of racial relations as they have been articulated through ecological imaginaries, and especially between South Africa and the southern United States over the course of the twentieth century. Through histories of exchange between these two spaces, I map out not only a transnational connection over ideas of race and racial policy, but also seek to show how pre-apartheid South African thinkers partook in a global imaginary of racist ideas. The idea here being that not only can apartheid (as well as pre-apartheid segregation) be rethought of as part of a global conversation on race and thus less as a South African anomaly, but also that the United States through its examples of various racist technologies was highly influential across the colonial and apartheid worlds. Finally, that, in addition to economic and industrial models of

⁴ Goyal, Yogita. “African Atrocity, American Humanity: Slavery and Its Transnational Afterlives.” *Research in African Literatures*, 45.3, Fall 2014.

modernization, the United States pioneered a certain global vision of colonial and racist modernity that was often solidified and perfected elsewhere.

I will show examples of both apartheid and pre-apartheid thinkers who imagined not only a deep connection between the racist imaginations of the United States and South Africa, but did so by representing race and racial governance through an ecological metaphorical structure, one grounded in notions of origins, purity and genealogical descent. Early segregationist thinker and traveler through the Jim Crow South, Maurice Evans, as well as later apartheid politician Hendrik Verwoerd both cite the United States as exemplary in their respective articulations of racial segregation as well as ideas of national modernity for South Africa. Both thinkers also frame their ideas on race – as well as various national policies towards policing it – as part of an ecosystem, which I argue attempted to ‘naturalize’ racism by grounding it in the (racial, social, and cultural) topography of South Africa and thereby make the separation of races appear as an ecologically determined effect of the national landscape itself.

As a way to think against these metaphorical ecosystems of division, I read Mda’s *Cion* as articulating a version of what Édouard Glissant imagines as an “ecological vision of Relation.”⁵ “Root identity,” which Glissant describes as “founded in the distant past in a vision, a myth of the creation of the world” is “ratified by a claim to legitimacy that allows a community to proclaim its entitlement to the possession of a land.”⁶ In opposition to root identity Glissant posits “relation identity,”⁷ defined in spaces such as the Caribbean, as linked to a politics of the ecological, whereby a sense of the “relational interdependence of all lands, of the

⁵ Glissant, Édouard. *The Poetics of Relation*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 146.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 144.

whole Earth” acts horizontally as a mode of relation – both to the soil, but also across its inhabitants – and in direct opposition to vertically based paradigms of root identity.⁸ Through a narrative that also complicates what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari term “aborescent metaphors,”⁹ the textual life-world of *Cion* is an ecology of relation where trees – once overdetermined symbols for genealogical decent, and thus markers of “root identity” – are imagined as spaces of not only historical narrative production, but also racial memory and creolization.

In what follows, and by offering examples of discursive exchange on ideas of race between the U.S. and South Africa, as well as close readings of Mda’s fictional intervention into this history, I want to posit not only an other genealogy to the development of technologies of racial governance during the twentieth century, but also gesture towards new relations for thinking about the legacies of segregation in the twenty-first. This transnational comparison takes a cue from Yogita Goyal’s recent reminder that, “racial injustice in the present can only be understood by recovering the slave past.”¹⁰ I want to suggest, as she and others have, that in conjunction with this idea of “melancholic historicism” where, according to Ian Baucom, “as time passes the past does not wane but intensifies,” that there be greater transnational critical focus on the relations between the histories of Africa and its diasporas.¹¹ In other words, reading the history of racial oppression in the U.S. from the perspective of post-apartheid South Africa, not only does much to locate apartheid itself within a global phenomenon of racial thinking – rather than being cast as a South African anomaly – but such a perspectival shift might also bear on the histories of racism being written at

⁸ Ibid., 146.

⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 18.

¹⁰ Yogita Goyal. “Introduction: Africa and the Black Atlantic.” *Research in African Literatures*, 45.3 (Fall 2014) ix.

¹¹ Quoted in Goyal, Ibid.

the moment in the United States, in places such as Ferguson and many others. For, as Goyal again poignantly remarks, if we look “not just back in time, but across in space – to diasporic and global engagements with slavery and to the different histories of race and empire that African writers bring to the conversation,” then I would argue that it is precisely through these relational, transnational encounters that we might find ways out of the melancholic cul-de-sac of a historical determinism, especially when confronting histories – and legacies – of racial oppression.¹²

Cion is a dual narrative, set both in the contemporary rural Ohio town of Kilvert, as well as the historical slave breeding farms of Virginia. Over the course of these intertwined stories, South Africa’s racial history comes to bear meaning for a twenty-first century American population who is seen in the novel as still struggling to find an idiom through which to articulate a sense of both racial identity and modernity. Mda meets these anxieties with a discourse on creolization articulated through the figure of the protagonist, Toloki, and the latter’s notions of art and aesthetic form. In *Cion*, Toloki, originally a rural transplant to the urban centers and townships of South Africa in *Ways of Dying*, finds in his new, rural southern Ohio home a space that, while marginalized, is represented as a vibrant ecology producing relations through various forms of creolization. From the local tradition of quilt making to the haunting sycamores surrounding the town of Kilvert, locally known as “ghost trees,” Toloki culls from both the American cultural and geographical landscapes, a theory of creolization, which seeks to reconcile the ideological impasses surrounding questions of racial identity and artistic practice.

The novel opens after a night of Halloween antics in Athens Ohio. Toloki – the self-proclaimed “professional mourner” – quickly finds himself an adoptive member

¹² Goyal, *Ibid*.

of the Quigley family who reside in Kilvert. The town itself is characterized both by the floods that periodically isolate it from surrounding villages as well as its unique population who the Quigleys describe with the acronym of the “WIN people” because of their heritage of “the White blood, the Indian blood, and the Negro blood.”¹³ The town of Kilvert thus functions in the novel as the geographical holder of a unique racial configuration: As Obed explains to Toloki, people “don’t move from here...the darn place pulls them back...It’s where our race of people was molded” (22). This centripetal force that Kilvert exhibits on its inhabitants is further attributed to the “pull of the ancestors.”¹⁴ Moreover, the story is told to us, and indeed the narrative resides in, the sycamore trees – locally referred to as “ghost trees” – that surround the environs of Kilvert. I want to suggest that Mda’s text is infinitely mediated, or made textual by the transposition through multiple mediums; mediums in the sense that the text exists as an act of conjuring from unique objects, and most notably ghost – or sycamore – trees, as well as quilts.

For instance, a common refrain of the novel is that, “The story is told by ghost trees” (91). Indeed, “that’s why most of it does not unfold before your eyes but is reported in the manner of fire-time or bedtime storytelling” (Ibid). As Obed further explains to Toloki, the ghost trees “are carries of memory” (23). Subsequently, we get the history of the molding of Kilvert’s population as part of the parallel unfolding of two narratives: one historical, of two runaway brothers, Nicodemus and Abednego, who escape the slave breeding farms of Virginia for southern Ohio, the other is the contemporary life of the Quigley family struggling to come to meaningful terms with the memories and traditions linked to this heritage. They do so through their unique cultivation of aesthetic practices, which in turn are linked to racial memories. In *Cion*,

¹³ Zakes Mda, *Cion*, 66; parenthetical quotations to follow.

¹⁴ Yogita Goyal. “The Pull of the Ancestors: Slavery, Apartheid, and Memory in Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying* and *Cion*.” *Research in African Literatures*. 42.2 (2011): 147-169.

it is from the ghost trees populating the Kilvert landscape that the Quigleys come to make narrative sense of the unique configuration of their racial and historical position. Witness to and even actors in the narrative of slave escapes, the ghost trees of Kilvert mark a landscape where memory and history are negotiated through the text's unique refusal of the stagnancy of nostalgia. Ghost trees transmit history as well as memory, but also keep and co-produce narratives of identity and of belonging, through an aesthetics of remixing, comingling, and creolization. Ghost trees function in the novel as landmarks that in turn map routes out of the traps of (racial) nostalgia – a position occupied by the Quigley mother, Ruth. This aesthetic orientation towards creolization, I argue, resides in Mda's exploration of Kilvert's "ecology of relation," between its residents, but also in the ways in which this ecosystem of creolization places Mda's southern U.S. within a transatlantic imaginary of relationships to slavery, apartheid and racial violence across the post/colonial world.

“The question of the century:” Racial modernity, Racial Futures, and Racial Homelands

I now turn to an example of the discursive exchange between the United States and South Africa that will potentially offer a historical cartography of racialist relations, and into which Mda's *Cion* offers an-other mode of relating to histories and spaces of racial violence. What I want to suggest in this section is that Mda's novel does not intervene into a vacuum. Rather, I argue that despite a dearth of critical attention, there does in fact exist a history of influence and exchange on issues of race and racial governance between the United States and South Africa, which spans at least the length of the twentieth century. In what follows, I will offer an example of just such an exchange embodied by a South African traveler who found in the Jim

Crow policies of the South a template to be exported to South Africa. In 1915 Maurice S. Evans, a prominent South African commentator on racial and political issues and noted liberal segregationist, published *Blacks and Whites in Southern States: A Study of the Race Problem in the United States from a South African Point of View*,¹⁵ a lengthy tome based on the author's extensive travels through the American South. In this work, Evans chronicles both the history of racial politics in the U.S., while also offering a sociological appraisal of contemporary racial dynamics in the South, grievances of the black population, and prescriptions for what he viewed as a transatlantic racial modernity. Evans believed that the pinnacle of the racial modernity once embodied by southern U.S. segregation would be reached across the Atlantic in the newly formed nation of South Africa. Arguing that the U.S. and the Union of South Africa shared similar national and racial fates, he articulates a unique foundation for his comparison, especially considering that it is potentially this first of its kind. Moreover, Evans relates that both nations were involved in formulations of modernity, which he believed to be predicated upon the governance of relations between races. As will be discussed below, Evans is explicit in his racial prophecies for South Africa, articulating a futurity based on increased racial segregation and essentially furthering the project of the southern United States.

In a blatant plagiarism of W. E. B. Du Bois, Evans frames his work with the preface that, "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the colour line."¹⁶ While Evans does perhaps feel the sentiment to be true, predicting the playing out of the next 85 years according to the problem of race relations, it becomes painfully clear that for Du Bois and for Evans neither the problem itself nor the

¹⁵ Maurice Evans, *Blacks and Whites in Southern States: A Study of the Race Problem in the United States from a South African Point of View*. London, New York: Longmans, Green & co., 1915 (henceforth, *Blacks and Whites*).

¹⁶ Ibid., v.

solutions to it are the same ones.¹⁷ Rather than Du Bois's notions of a hybridized or doubled consciousness as the basis of a twentieth century sense of modernity, Evans's version is a vision of accelerated and further-entrenched segregation. Indeed, Evans was also an open proponent of the Tuskegee model of Booker T. Washington, which was based on a program of targeted education determined by cultural and racial factors. In fact, many South African segregationists and white supremacists unfortunately appropriated Tuskegee as an educational and social model thought to further instill an ideology of separation between the racial, and hence social, spheres.

If Evans's conception of the problem animating the twentieth century was fundamentally different from Du Bois, his framing of the question of race relations was no less global in scope than Du Bois's own purview laid out in *The World and Africa*.¹⁸ Under the heading of "The Question of the Century," Evans begins his study of *Blacks and Whites* with a characteristically prophetic and portentous mapping of what he viewed as a shifting global order:

Many signs and portents are in the air showing that
among the many questions calling for solution, which are

¹⁷ All this becomes explicit later in Evans's volume in a section entitled "Two Schools" where he compares the racial ideologies embedded in the practices of both Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. Tuskegee, for Evans provided an educational and socially pragmatic model of separate development through the validation and training of 'race knowledge'. Race education was something thought to be key to the further formation of separate development plans in South Africa by Evans and others. There is a formidable literature in this area of race relations and educational plans. See for instance: *A South African Pilgrimage* (1977) as well as *The History of Native Policy in South Africa from 1830 to the Present Day* (1924), both by Edgar Brookes. Also, see *The Education of the South African Native* (1917), C. T. Loram. Loram's works remain important for their insight into the South African liberal imagination and how it conceived of the entanglement between education and race policy in the early twentieth century. For more specific studies of the impact of Booker T. Washington and the Tuskegee model on South Africa, see *Booker T. Washington: Volume 2: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915*. (1986), by Louis R. Harlan. Also, Paul B. Rich, "The Appeals of Tuskegee: James Henderson, Lovedale, and the Fortunes of South African Liberalism, 1906-1930" *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 20.2 1987 271-292.

¹⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois. *The World and Africa; an Inquiry into the Part which Africa has Played in World History*. New York: International Publishers, 1965.

brought to the front by the rapidly changing *conception of the world*, that of the relations of the races hitherto regarded as civilized with those we have been accustomed to consider backward, will be the world-wide and important one.¹⁹

Evans positions South Africa and the (southern) U.S. at the vanguard of a modernity which, according to him, would only be properly manifested through the correct management of the world's races, bifurcated very generally here into "civilized" and "backward" camps. Evans's opening begs a few questions, especially regarding what this "rapidly changing conception of the world" actually looked like, and what were the forces behind it. Moreover, why at this moment are South Africa and the U.S. seen as uniquely positioned spaces from which to theorize a potential answer to the world's racial relations problem?

It is clear that Evans sees something of South Africa in the southern United States because they were part of a shared racial imaginary. What Evans is able to recognize are the common racial foundations of both countries, core principles forming the racial horizons of each. Evans speaks of a quite intangible and yet readily recognizable sentiment experienced by the South African visitor – presumably a white visitor – to the Southern U.S.:

Notwithstanding the markedly different experiences through which each country has gone since European settlement first began the visitor from South Africa to the Southern States sees much that is familiar. Every now

¹⁹ Evans, *Blacks and Whites*, 1; emphasis mine.

and then some experience brings vividly to his mind the country he left...It was one of the pleasures of my visit to find, so far away, how often the very conditions I had left were reproduced before my eyes, the thousands of miles melted away, *and Africa was before me*.²⁰

Evans conjures quite a transnational image/imaginary here between these two spaces, the Atlantic “melt[ing] away” and Africa suddenly appearing on the horizon. The image also serves as a spatial teleology of sorts for Evans’s vision of a racial modernity for the twentieth century, one in which it becomes clear for him that the U.S. had largely failed on the racial relations front, leaving open the way for South Africa to articulate a platform of racial governance that, according to Evans, will push towards an increasingly segregated – and hence more modern – national future.

In the final two brief sections of Evans’s study, entitled “The Future” and “For South Africa,” there is a shift in the author’s tone, from the ethnographic, almost pastoralist, descriptions of the southern U.S. life-world to the terse aphorisms of these final pages, much of which reads like a manifesto on racial governance. Evans prefaces these directives with a hauntingly pessimistic passage that imagines a southern United States, left defeated by post-Civil War Reconstruction and yet supposedly sage by the weight of its racial tensions, speaking to a newly formed South African nation: “Too late it may be for the South, but I feel that if some of her best men...could counsel us, they would say that on such lines [segregation, guardianship], and not in the way that was forced upon them by the conquering North, lies our hope for the future in South Africa.”²¹ A haunting passage in which Evans ventriloquizes a

²⁰ Evans, *Black and White*, 4; emphasis mine.

²¹ Evans, *Black and White*, 270.

Southern voice laying out a prophecy for the twentieth century, one in which models of statehood must, this voice argues, be based on a nearly-religious devotion to racial separation.

Indeed, according to this transatlantic racialist imaginary, the assimilatory (both cultural and racial) stance of the North in post-bellum America is seen as the “principle sin” committed by the U.S., as well as the greatest potentially damning temptation for a budding South Africa.²² In his characteristic mixture of racialist and theological imaginaries, Evans lists these “principal sins of the white South against the Negro...which must be purged before racial peace can come to the land: (1) Miscegenation, (2) Lynching, (3) Injustice in the Courts, (4) Unfair discrimination in traveling, etc.” Again, note the religious framing of these as *sins*. The idea of racial mixture is not simply seen as a social ill – though this is certainly also the case, but as an affront both to God (as a transgression that needs atoning) and as an affront to the nation, both the symbolic body and the geographical nation (“the land”).²³ According to this collective Southern voice, if South Africa is to have a future then it will be predicated upon a religious vigilance against assimilation and race mixture.

In the final section, entitled “For South Africa” Evans makes a list of recommendations, or “definite and specific lessons” aimed at a South African audience he presumptuously characterizes as “practical men of affairs.”²⁴ Noting the title of this section, it is possible to read a splitting of the authorial voice from the traveling commentator-cum-ethnographer Evans, to the imagined Southern white, worn and weary with racial tension, “filled with doubts as to the future, and...tragic experience” speaking across the Atlantic. The message is clear: miscegenation or racial admixture is the doom of a (white) nation. However, the potentially doubled

²² Ibid., 275.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 281.

sense of the titular “For” makes this message somewhat more complicated. Is this the “for” indicating a directionality in Evans text, representing the accumulation of his own ethnographic experience? That is, while earlier sections focused on their southern neighbors across the Atlantic, this section is merely information meant ‘for’ South Africa. This would seem to suggest that Evans is still writing from a national perspective, as a South African writing home, and offering what he saw to be his experiential wisdom ‘for South Africa.’

However, what if this “for” registers the intended, as in the addressee of some transatlantic letter written from the collective perspective of the (U. S.) South’s “best men” as Evans calls them? Does Evans perform a racial(ist) ventriloquism here? The question is more than merely a structuralist one. For if so, I argue that the voice calling out “for South Africa” represents something even more sinister than Evans’s own nationalism. It is the voice of a transatlantic racism, a call for solidarity beyond national boundaries based on the protection of the white race globally. Indeed, such calls are not uncommon in various historical, especially colonial, contexts. But I believe what Evans taps into here is slightly more menacing for its otherwise unrelated contexts, the southern U.S. and South Africa. These two spaces have no ostensible reason to communicate with one another *except* in the preservation of a future century of global white rule. As George Fredrickson²⁵ writes, structurally and historically, the circumstances of the U.S. and South Africa are so radically different as to be nearly incommensurable for study.²⁶ And yet, here in Evans’ text, the author makes the two

²⁴ George Fredrickson, *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 289.

²⁵ For Fredrickson, southern-style segregation differs from proto-apartheid separate development along cultural lines. Southern blacks, Fredrickson claims, were “despite all the discrimination and *de facto* or *de jure* segregation and disenfranchisement, much more integrated into the white-dominated society and culture than most Africans have ever been in South Africa...It [Jim Crow segregation] was more of a problem of how to erect a set of barriers to the social and political inclusion of a population group that was by the

nations speak to one another in the hushed tones of racial lament and racist futures, making suspect Fredrickson's claims of incommensurability.

In this letter, channeled through the pen of Evans and which taps into a nostalgia for an idea of the bucolic, agrarian past of the U.S. South, the southern experience can be summed up in three main prescriptions it makes for South Africa. The first is the supposedly irreducible difference of the races. Evans's platform for a modern South African rests fundamentally on this vision of a national topography perforated by the lines of racial and ethnic delineation; all other state-level infrastructural needs would be determined by this national logic (one already sees the planting of formal apartheid's seeds here). Evans, the sojourner to the south, is categorical in the racial 'knowledge' he feels he has garnered, stating quite bluntly that, "The races are so different that to reduce antagonism and give each its full opportunity for race development, a conscious and reasoned attempt at race separation should be made," and that, "such separate communities should be under white guidance, assisted by the more advanced of the black race," his second fundamental point.²⁷ Ultimately, and based on his extensive travels through the environs of the Jim Crow South, Evans articulates an uncanny prefiguration of what would increasingly be formalized under the banner of apartheid in South Africa. Moreover, it is important to see the ways in which Evans calls for the South African functionalization of a southern agrarian nostalgia, one based on and in the institution of slavery.

This idea of racial delineation is so imperative for Evans, indeed it will come

nineteenth century willing and able to participate in a common society." There are multiple historical factors which problematize Fredrickson's claim: the increased urbanization of South African blacks over the twentieth century (which Fredrickson admits only in a footnote), as well as the fact that his study does not have the luxury of a post-apartheid perspective.

²⁷ Ibid.

later to form the backbone of Afrikaner nationalism as well as apartheid ideology, that he echoes this sentiment twice in this otherwise condensed section. This has to do with what he sees as perhaps the paramount issue of the entire racist platform, that in America the “great sin of the white man against the black lay not in slavery, nor in economic exploitation, but in the debouchment of the race by illicit sexual intercourse.”²⁸ Above and beyond all the ills and violence perpetrated by the practices of slavery, and the systemic disenfranchisement of generations, Evans is unwavering in his claim that violating the sanctity of each race’s supposed uniqueness amounts to the greatest moral as well as national transgression. The material trappings of race, or rather the infrastructural models to which racial ideas are able to attach vary greatly according to the expedients of the moment and the place. However, what Evans distills into a quite unmistakable essential fear lurking behind these (political, economic) systems, is recognizable across and within each context. The idea being that these affinities would be in the service of a shared racist future, indeed a century of the color line.

What the Future Looked Like: Arborescent Metaphors and Verwoerd’s “Big Idea of Separate Development”

On May 7th, 1957 Hendrik F. Verwoerd, then South African Minister of Native Affairs, delivered a speech entitled “Separate Development: The positive side,”²⁹ in order to commemorate the opening of the Transkei Territorial Authority. In his address, Verwoerd’s notion of separate development is structured by a metaphor that figures racial and national discreteness as a tree. The speech is an inaugural shift in the

²⁸ Ibid., 281.

²⁹ Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd, *Separate Development: the Positive Side*. Pretoria: Information Service, Department of Native Affairs, 1958.

life of apartheid towards what historian David Welsh notes was a “supposedly more ‘positive’ version, called ‘separate development’ ...introduced in the hope that an increasingly hostile world would accept that preparing ‘homelands’ (Bantustans) for self-government was analogous to the decolonization process occurring in Africa.”³⁰ The Bantu Authorities Act, an early project of Verwoerd’s policy architecture, was originally passed in 1951 and the Transkei Territorial Authority was the first regional “native area” established under this foundational provision of the apartheid plan, and thus a major event of paramount symbolic and political importance in the construction of apartheid’s vision of modernity.³¹ The Authorities Act mapped a vision of modernity imagined as a nation- state grid of autonomous and supposedly homogenous racial enclaves.

I want to turn briefly to the origins of Verwoerd’s affinities for American racial discourse. After completing his studies at Stellenbosch, Verwoerd spent 1926 in Germany and then part of 1927 in the U.S. on a lecture and study tour of American psychology schools and laboratories. An academic first, before his later and more infamous career as apartheid politician, Verwoerd was Professor of Psychology and then Chair of the Department of Sociology and Social Work at the University of Stellenbosch where he was characterized as a “expert in American social science” as well as a “proponent of American social welfare systems.”³² Indeed, Verwoerd, the intellectual and political architect of the South African apartheid infrastructure, not only traveled extensively in the United States during his studies as a psychologist, but he openly acknowledged his reliance on American social science and its vision of

³⁰ David Welsh, *The Rise of and Fall of Apartheid*, 52.

³⁰ See for instance Saul Dubow’s *Racial Segregation and the Origins of Apartheid in South Africa*. Also, Hermann Giliomee’s *The Afrikaners*, and “The Making of the Apartheid Plan, 1929- 1948,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29.2 (2003): 373-392. The latter offers a slightly more apologetic version of this relationship.

³¹ Roberta B. Miller, “Science and Society in the Early Career of H.F. Verwoerd,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 19.4 (1993): 646.

itself as a progressivist discipline involved in the modern analysis of the U.S. sociological and economic topography.³³

Verwoerd prefaces much of his Separate Development speech with a sweeping universalistic assumption of how “every man wants to have something which is his own – something which is separately his.”³⁴ He continues to define the terms of his discourse as it crescendos into a didactic vision of a racial modernity, stating that, “‘Separateness’ means: Something for oneself... The other word refers to what is bigger still, viz. ‘development,’ which means growth.”³⁵ Not only would the future according to Verwoerd’s apartheid plan unfold along lines separating domains of desire (“wants to have something which is his own”), but also growth could only occur according to this model through the careful cultivation of this separateness. Separate development, Verwoerd claims, “is a tree, a fruit tree which this Government gave the Bantu of South Africa. It planted the tree, but that tree must be tended in order to grow. If it is looked after well, it will grow and bear fruit.”³⁶ South Africa’s racial modernity was envisioned at this moment as a contract between the National Party Government and the various Bantu ethnic communities, groups defined as such by the South African government, mostly through the work done under the umbrella of the Native Affairs Department.

It is important to note how Verwoerd’s tree as racial identity metaphor not only shifts how we read ideas of race and modernity within apartheid discourse, but also reveals the ways in which – as a separatist platform – it also attempted to ‘indigenize’ itself within the South African ecological imaginary. This also means that the tree,

³² The American social science scene Verwoerd witnessed was a discourse influenced particularly by Taylorism and the sociology of “scientific management,” which was popular with the American business and political sectors at the time, and complicit in fueling America’s fervor for social engineering during the early twentieth century.

³⁴ Verwoerd, *Separate Development*, 4.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

pictured on the pamphlet as the baobab – an iconic image of the African landscape – is textually colonized by Verwoerd’s use of a western trope for national-racial identity and genealogy. As Édouard Glissant defines it, “Root identity” is “founded in the distant past in a vision, a myth...is ratified by a claim to legitimacy that allows a community to proclaim its entitlement to the possession of land, [and]...*is preserved by being projected onto other territories.*”³⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, from whom Glissant develops a reading of root identity, also note how “It is odd how the tree has dominated Western reality and all of Western thought, from botany to biology and anatomy, but also gnosiology, theology, ontology, all of philosophy... the root foundation, *Grund, racine, fondement.*”³⁸ Ultimately, Verwoerd’s tree of separate development represents a reutilization of the southern African topography in the service of creating a racist aesthetic register for representing the modern South African nation.

It is evident in Verwoerd’s “Separate Development” speech how, in order to convey “the positive side” of separate development – or apartheid – to his audience, he relies quite heavily on this metaphor of a “fruit-bearing tree.” In fact, the official pamphlet in which the speech is transcribed and published by the Information Service of the Department of Native Affairs is adorned with nothing but the drawing of an African baobab tree with the bolded words “Separate Development.” In addition to capitalizing on this long tradition in Western thinking of imagining belonging and genealogical descent through the “arborescent”³⁹ imagery of trees, roots, and branches, Verwoerd’s ‘agricultural-nationalist’ vision of planting the southern African landscape with individual and unique trees (i.e. national/racial groups) is a powerful visual

³⁷ Glissant, *Poetics*, 143.

³⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 18.

³⁹ Ibid.

symbol for the particular valences apartheid would initially take under his tenure as Minister of Native Affairs and then as Prime Minister. The tree metaphor also embodies the larger vision of ‘grand apartheid’ as a platform for modernity in South Africa. Even the growth of Verwoerd’s tree symbolically marks the teleology or progress and development of individual and separate national/racial identities.

“Memory is what you make of it”: Ghost Trees, Creolization, and Ecological Modernity

If the tree is a ready image for Verwoerd’s notion of separate development and grander idea of apartheid as the highest branch of Western modernity, then the depiction of sycamore trees as “carriers of memories,” “keepers of secrets,” and the tellers of stories in *Cion* imagines a radically different relationship between race and its representation through aborescent metaphors. In other words, while trees operate in Verwoerd’s speech according to Glissant’s ideas of “root identity”, as ecological markers of delineation and division, in *Cion* the sycamore is pictured as more resonate with an “ecological vision of relation.” Mda’s sycamore trees are both holders of racial memory as well as spaces of innovative renewal and remixing of that memory. The trees, as “carriers of memories,” are transhistorical bearers of the violence of slavery and the triumphs – and pitfalls – of escape, as well as witnesses to how these collective narratives are memorialized in the novel’s present moment. In the haunting chapters of what Yogita Goyal names the novel’s “neo-slave narrative,” where we learn of the enslavement and eventual escape of two brothers, Abednego and Nicodemus, and the tradition of quilt making practiced by their mother, the Abyssinian Queen, the reader is no longer guided by Toloki’s narrative voice. Rather, these chapters are usually told *through* objects, such as quilts or ghost trees. Through these narrative and vocal shifts, the sycamore tree becomes a mixed and mixing

medium that blurs the lines between writing and oral storytelling. Textually the story comes to us through multiple mediums: both as a witnessing bore by the tree themselves, as well as the stories they pass on to and through the narrator, delivered in ritual telling around firesides and bedsides.⁴⁰

If sycamores trees form part of an ecosystem of slave life, both on and off the plantation, as well as providing spaces of both mythological and practical refuge, then they also function in *Cion* as transhistorical carriers of and catalysts for memory. However, just as the village of Kilvert is a space where race memory is problematized, the sycamore tree is a complicated and complicating medium for the transmission of memory and history as well racial identity. Mda's sycamore trees do not simply dictate the "many stories" and "secrets" of the past. Rather the telling comes through as an interactive performance that happens across the historical time of the novel, from the slave escapes of the run-away brothers to the Quigley family in the present day.

For instance, at the moment of a chapter transition between the contemporary life of the Quigleys and the historical life-world of the escaped slave brothers, Toloki finds some of Orpah's drawings which are contraband according to her mother Ruth's traditional ideas about what counts as aesthetic practice. The real issue for Ruth, and the reason she systematically destroys her daughter's sketches when she discovers them on her suspiciously-frequent "spring cleaning" rituals, is because Orpah once tried to transpose these highly abstract and stylized drawings into inspirational motifs for the sewing of quilts; a practice Ruth had once been invested in passing down to her daughter, that is of course before the former's conservative sensibilities had been

⁴⁰ This is an eco-critical mode of history writing that bares resemblance to a turn within postcolonial writing/studies towards "ecocriticism." There is a productive comparison to be made here between Mda's story telling, memory holding sycamores and Michelle Cliff's locating of the island of Jamaica "During the periods in which history was recorded by indentations of rock and shell" (*Abeng*, New York: Plume, 1995, 3). However, I believe Mda's point is not merely a historiographical one. Rather, the ecological, in Mda, becomes the site of creolization; of mixing between forms (memory, history, etc.).

offended through innovation. When Toloki discovers that Orpah hides her drawings in the grotto of a sycamore in the woods near the Quigley home, he believes that, “even in the faint light I can see that these are some of the most wonderful drawings I have seen in my life” (90). After this discovery, which has consequences for the rest of the novel’s plot, the chapter ends with a shift from Toloki’s voice to the narrator’s, who tells us in closing the chapter that, “The ghost tree. It is a keeper of secrets. It has many stories to tell” (Ibid.).

One of the stories the ghost tree has to tell is of the escape of the two brothers, Abednego and Nicodemus. Indeed, we are told, that, “The ghost tree: the one in front of the Abyssinian Queen’s cabin with its wide span of white branches...witnessed the whole journey of her two boys, right up to the demise of Nicodemus and the exile of Abednego in Tabler Town” (91). Aside from being omnipresent and seemingly omniscient landmarks in the ecological topographies of the slave world of the novel, the ghost trees not only bare witness to life on and off the plantation, but also function as producers of the narratives about this life-world. Part of the Abyssinian Queen’s fame on the Fairfield Farms plantation has to do with her dramatic storytelling abilities. She would climb the sycamore outside her cabin and launch into mythical tales about the beginning of the world. However, we are told that,

the tree was more than just a place for launching her swooping tales. Its white bark, mottled with green and brown, provided here with enchanting characters when the moon shone on the trunk like a spotlight, shaping out figures in deep contrast of dark and light. She spoke with these characters and made them do things that none of the audience ever imagined a bark could do. *She made them*

... speak words never heard from any tree on earth (Ibid.; emphasis mine).

Witnesses to a broad life-world both on and off the plantation, as well as co-creators of its narratives, “keeper of secrets” and teller of stories, the ghost trees in *Cion* are something of an ecological archive, not in a static sense, but rather in an organic and transhistorical witnessing and remixing of memory, myth and history. The ghost trees are spaces in the slave life-world where stories are held, and passed on, but also created in the delicate balance of an ecological equilibrium made up of actors, characters, places of refuge, etc. As these spaces come to hold meaning for the later descendants of this slave narrative, it becomes clear that the ghost trees can pass on and produce narratives across the temporal divide of the novel’s life-worlds.

When Nicodemus seeks refuge from the daily life of the plantation, he hides in the hollow trunk of the tree in order to “practice his writing or play his reed flute” (Ibid.). The tree is lovingly referred to as the “singing sycamore” and “everybody pretended that the ghost tree produced the music” (Ibid.). While the Abyssinian Queen’s stories, told literally from the sycamore itself, enchant the community, Nicodemus’s own flute playing becomes part of the collective imaginative landscape of the slave quarters on Fairfield Farms, where everyone felt “good to play along” and believe that the tree was in fact a singing tree. The imaginary of this group is intimately and ecologically entangled with the ghost tree as part of the novel’s ecosystem of relations. For instance, the tree was also known amongst the slaves to be haunted, and “not because it was a ghost tree but for the well-known fact that it harbored in its soul the spirits of little children who once sat under it listening to the stories and telling their own eons before the world was killed” (Ibid.). In the grotto of the ghost tree is produced a cosmological understanding of the slaves’ life-world, a

creation myth of where and how this world came into being, as well as where this world is thought to regenerate itself. And so as Nicodemus hides inside its trunk, “the trills from [his] flute become multiplied as if many flutes were playing, [and] people knew that the voices of the little children had merged with the slurs and staccatos of his flute. So, the singing sycamore was a singing sycamore after all” (92).

The ghost tree, as a space of multi-vocal articulations where voices, life-worlds and different cosmologies “merge” and become a relational ecology of the plantation, this opens up an ontology of re-mixture and regeneration characterizing the slave world. Indeed, the tree is also space for the articulation of a creation myth of the world as well as an ecological and eschatological allegory for the escape from slavery. The spirits of the children whose voices merge with Nicodemus’s flute wait beneath the ghost tree to be “reunited with all *the children from the tribes of the universe* on a regenerated earth that would be free of sickness and death; an earth *where man, woman and child would roam free*, owned by no one” (91-92; emphasis mine). The ghost tree holds a teleology of both global creolization – where spirits and bodies from across the tribes of the universe will become entangled, as well as a creation mythology that portends a healed planet and one in which an end to the oppression of slavery would imply an ecological salve to the woes of an otherwise terminally-sick earth. But also, the tree produces a creation myth without notions of either origins or original purity as the genesis of its imagining of the world.

If the ghost trees marking the plantation landscape of *Cion* are ecological archives of transhistorical memory, they are also spaces of practical refuge from the dangers both on and off the plantation; from keeping hidden within Fairfield Farms the provisions needed for escape to actual hiding places from slave hunters off the plantation. After Nicodemus witnessed the Mistress of the Plantation exiting the cabin

of a recently acquired slave who she has taken as a lover, the boys decide that their days of relative security – having enjoyed a privileged position because of their mother’s status – were numbered, and that they must make an impromptu escape in the middle of winter. During their escape, Nicodemus and Abednego seek refuge in a ghost tree they find on their route, one which “they knew at once was even older than the one in front of their mother’s cabin...for its hollow heart was so big that a whole family could live there” (104). However, what the boys do not know is that this is precisely the role the tree has played over its long life, providing sanctuary to families of runaways. The boys, through their communion in and with the ghost tree, unwittingly enter into a shared history with others like them who have sought refuge and fled from the dangers of enslavement. If the boys do not understand the larger historical topography that they have fled into by leaving the plantation, then the ghost tree does. “Indeed,” we are told, “the ghost tree knew what the boys did not,” namely that they are not the first, nor likely the last, to seek its refuge (Ibid.). Linking the two brothers to generations of escaped slaves, the ghost trees are an ecological ontology not only larger in geographical scope, but longer in historical vision than that of the boys themselves, and one in which those who have been witness to racial violence can commune across generational and historical divides.

The past, the history of slavery, the escapes from it across the Ohio River, and bustling mix of free life in Tabler Town, are transmitted to the present and to members of the Quigley family through the narrative transmission received through the sycamore tree. In the contemporary chapters where Toloki finds himself an adoptive member of the Quigley household in the rural town of Kilvert, we come to learn of the connection between this place, its residents, and the historical Tabler Town, a refuge on the borders of the U.S. slave world extending to the east and to the south. Indeed,

Tabler Town – now roughly equivalent to Kilvert – is described during the time of slavery as a refuge for “Africans who had settled there from Virginia...some from as early as the late 1700s...all former slaves, intermarried with the Native Americans and with the Irish immigrants who had also received sanctuary in Tabler Town. *A new race of people was founded*” (122). The descendants of this “new race” are the inhabitants of modern day Kilvert mentioned above as the “W.I.N. people” and whose members such as Orpah Quigley still struggle to interpret this past as it is transmitted to her through the aborescent mediums of the ghost tree.

Through the discovery of Orpah’s hidden drawings in the trunk of the sycamore, Toloki comes to understand some of the ways in which the ghost trees mark an ecology of relations, not only between the Quigley family, but also between the residents of Kilvert and their ancestors; the trees being creative conduits for the remembering of forgotten histories, of slavery, or escape, and of the aesthetic practices – such as quilting – for representing these experiences. Not only are the ghost trees spaces of refuge or sanctuary for Orpah’s drawings, but they are also motifs for Orpah’s creativity. From the drawings Toloki discovers that “Orpah is obsessed with ghost trees...The trees feature in them in many forms...Cracked branches and hollow trunks twisted in agony. Roots exposed above the earth. Knees bent in prayer. Trees in flight. Trees in dance. Trees caught in a whirlwind. Trees in a trance...Ghost trees...often so stylized you wouldn’t know they were ghost trees. You wouldn’t know they were trees at all” (123). Orpah’s innovative, “stylized” aesthetic stands in marked antagonism towards her mother’s traditional notion of design. For Ruth, her guiding principle in sewing quilts is a religious devotion to aesthetic orthodoxy and traditionalism in both design and form. Orpah’s drawings, on the other hand, represent a creative practice of mixture and what I am calling an aesthetics of creolization.

These practices of creolization are also seen in Orpah's penchant for playing bluegrass music on a sitar, as well as her attempts to transpose these stylized ghost tree motifs into quilt designs, much to her mother's chagrin; the issue being mostly one of a question of aesthetic abstraction versus traditional design. Though this article does not allow the space, this distinction between abstraction, or innovation and traditionalism maps roughly on to questions around memory versus history, as well as various forms of (near pathological) nostalgia for the past that haunts most of the novel's characters.

The transmission of memory or history through the ghost trees is seen in a ritual that regularly occurs between Orpah and her father, Mahlon Quigley. The two meet each night in a surreptitious encounter where the father dons elaborate costume and enters his daughter's room, only to emerge in the early hours of the morning. Indeed, because Toloki is initially driven to a sexual obsession with Orpah's sitar playing he frequently finds himself in the bushes outside her room, "abusing himself" and thus becomes unwilling witness to these covert meetings between father and daughter (264). The "giggles and moans" he hears coming from behind the locked door and drawn blinds convince him initially that this nocturnal ritual is an incestuous one. Upon being discovered one night by Mahlon, Toloki is forced to witness the ritual and comes to see that not only are the ghost trees forms of refuge as well as creative motif, but that they are also literally conduits or transmitters of stories, or memories, of the both the Quigley past but also of the larger Kilvert historical topography. Mahlon plays a special role, as a "medium man," in this transmission from the historical, through the ecological, and into an aesthetic register, in the process of interrogating how this group processes and integrates its past into their daily lives.

Mahlon walks the forest of sycamore trees in order to gather stories for Orpah, who in turn produces sketches from these "memories" (239). Indeed, Orpah

desperately wants to complete this aesthetic economy by translating her sketches into motifs for quilts, an act that would intimately connect her to her mother, but also to the traditional practices of the Kilvert people. However, Ruth's aesthetic policing of tradition means that Orpah's aesthetic and historical vision is short-circuited as the mother refuses to let her daughter sow what would amount to sacrilegious (read: abstract and stylistically innovative) quilts. However, Mahlon and Orpah continue to observe their nightly vigils, which consist of Mahlon first collecting stories from the ghost trees. In the early hours of the morning, when "Dawn is a whisper away, the medium man treads lightly in the forest" and the ghost trees

whisper stories to him. As they are wont to do when he
walks in the forest. Be it day or night. From the branches
that touch the sky the leaves breathe out stories of
another time and gently blow them down to him.
Memories of how the Abyssinian Queen flapped her
wings and swooped to the ground and of how the sun was
once lonely because it had no one to play with. His body
soaks in these memories, so that his mouth may retell
them later (238-9).

Mahlon then "performs these memories for the spirit child [Orpah]," as he "get his stories from the ghost trees. He transmits them to Orpah who then re-creates them" (238, 266). The ghost trees are spaces where historical narratives are passed on across generations but also remade and remixed in the present as a way to rethink about what the past *might* mean.

Imagining ghost trees as ecological archives of the past has the initially obvious implication that the novel puts forward a dynamic vision of history; placing it

somewhere closer to ideas of memory without, however, falling into pathologies of nostalgia. However, Mahlon and Orpah's rituals around the memories he has collected from the ghost trees also present the past as not only diffuse – as messages carried through the biological energies of a delicate ecosystem – but also, relatedly, as not static. In other words, the past is not *the past* in the sense that it holds as a steady signifier or a readily accessible truth. Rather, as a message whispered down from the highest branches, through the body of the medium man and elaborate performances, ending up finally as sketches of memories, history is imagined as an aesthetic creation *produced* in the crucible of biological and ecological transmission, performativity, as well as artistic mixture and innovation. In this aesthetic creation of the past, the ecology of history is just as important as the 'human' element in its production. Indeed, we are reminded of how the particular tree Nicodemus and Abednego sought refuge in "knew what the two boys did not, namely the long history of other escapees who had found sanctuary in its trunk" (104). This ecological imagining of history offers the characters in the novel a different way to access and thus to relate to the past. Though speaking about quilts in this instance, Toloki sagely tells the reader: "Whether there is historical evidence or not that the likes of Abednego and Nicodemus used the quilts to escape from slavery is not important. What matters is that their descendants believe they did, and therefore they did. We all construct our past as we go along." The idea is the same for the role of the ghost tree.

Moreover, if ghost trees offer a different way to relate (to) history, then the process of constructing the past as Mahlon and Orpah perform it also models a different mode of relation to others in the present. If history is accessible – or rather producible – only through an intimate connection to not only to the surrounding ecosystem but also to others who exist in relation to that same delicate biological

balance, then perhaps the novel offers us a view of history that is predicated upon a deep relationship to our natural surroundings in the present. In turn, it is the sense of this shared relationship with others listening to the same “whispers” and “memories” that resonates with what Édouard Glissant calls an “ecological vision of Relation.”⁴¹ Mda’s imagining of ghost trees, instead of reinforcing ideas of “root identity” with all the attendant notions of purity, filiation, and territorial expansion, rather plants the seed for a mode of relation based upon ecosystemic intimacies and the “relational interdependence of all land.”⁴² In Mda’s work, this ecological basis for relation, much in the way Glissant describes, moves away from violent couplings between identity and geography. Glissant writes that “Ecology, going above and beyond its concerns with what we call the environment,” if it “bears the germ of criticism of territorial thought (of its sacredness and exclusiveness)...that ecology will then act as politics.”⁴³ Mda’s ghost trees function as a political mode precisely for the way in which this ecosystem allows for a non-hegemonic relationship to the past and the production of history, as well for the modes of relationality it offers to those who exist as part of its ecological network.

I want to conclude by arguing that Mda’s use of ghost trees, in articulating what Glissant calls an ecological vision of relation, repositions humans in relation both to their histories but also to one another; ghost trees move us transhistorically back in time, but also horizontally across in context. Comparing Verwoerd’s ‘tree’ imagery to Mda’s “sycamore trees” in *Cion*, I argue that Mda articulates an ‘eco-modernity’ resonant with and yet altered from Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the rhizome. It is Mda’s unique use of trees – as holders of history *and* memory, as well as haunted and haunting muses of artistic creativity, that allows for a recombination or

⁴¹ Glissant, *Poetics*, 146.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

creolization of aesthetic forms as keepers of identity in the context of post-slavery America as well as the greater Atlantic World. Ultimately, the sycamore tree as holder of memories allows for not only an ecological mode of remixing the past, but also for mapping another space for the relation of South Africa and the U.S. This 'south' relationship not only taps into the earlier and largely under-acknowledged history of racist exchange discussed above, but also forms an aesthetic directive away from the racist foundations once bringing these two nations in relation to one another. Mda's sycamores form part of an eco-modernity based not on categorical separations such as those between racial identities, nor on the unproductive distinction between history and memory, or cultural tradition and aesthetic creativity. In the ghost trees Mda imagines an aesthetics of creolization, where these modes exist in productive mixture and relation to one another. It is a relation based not on structural comparison of economic, or political or slaving systems, but rather a transatlantic imaginary of the ecological as a mode for representing and negotiating histories of racial oppression.

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